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MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

Fans get a little bit of everything

From the challenging avant-garde and eclectic fusion to a DJ master class and even some folk

Our music writers are at the Montreal International Jazz Festival every night, trying to catch as many concerts as they can manage. Here are excerpts from their observations about Saturday night's shows. For the full reviews and blog posts, go to montrealgazette.com/wordsandmusic. And keep checking montrealgazette.com/jazzfest for up-to-the-minute news and reviews.

Luckily, the avant-garde still has a place at our jazz festival. Jean Derome, with his quintet Dangereux Zhoms, proved at L'Astral that the programmers still care to present the more challenging – though equally satisfying – side of the genre ... Where the composing may dip its feet in, the improvising dives head first.

ADAM KINNER

PHOTOS: BRYANNA BRADLEY THE GAZETTE

Alex Cuba at Club Soda: the concert showcased his voice.

All the numbers in Alex Cuba's Club Soda concert showcased the artist's voice, a smoothly modulated instrument that clearly and easily delivers a range of emotion, even innuendo. He set up the infectious Las Mujeres accurately: "The whole song is (about conveying), 'Baby, if you cook the way you dance, I will eat everything you put on my plate." We got the message, muchacho.

LYNN MOORE

"I know this is a jazz festival," Basia Bulat said during her show at the Musée d'art contemporain. "And the autoharp is not a jazz instrument; it's a more of a blues instrument. But as I learned last night, jazz fans are open-minded people." Jazz vs. blues discussions were beside the point as the London, Ont., singer-songwriter and her four-piece band dug into her repertoire of rhythmically engaged, heartswelling folk tunes.

T'CHA DUNLEVY

With one of the biggest smiles I think I've ever seen, saxophonist Evan Arntzen led B.C.-based The October Trio through a number of artful and melodic songs on the CBC stage. Think of Wayne Shorter's wily harmony but with the kind of funky, R&B influenced rhythms that Dave Holland's more recent groups are known for.

ADAM KINNER

James Hunter on the TD Stage: his voice was rought after playing two shows in a row.

Sure, we loved David Sánchez at first for that Latin fire, but there's so much more to his playing now. It was all on display as he led a quartet at Théâtre Jean Duceppe of Place des Arts. There was a deep tenor sound that evoked Dexter Gordon and there were poised and mature improvisations that drew on a wide harmonic language.

PETER HADEKEL

There's not a lot of breathing room in Victor Wooten's music. During his concert at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts, the lightning-fingered bassist and his supporting musicians seemed to fill every available space in their highly eclectic jazz-fusion set list. Yet they never seemed to be at cross purposes: the sound was very much that of an ensemble.

BERNARD PERUSSE

The Gazette's jazz fest team is writing up a prescription for James Hunter: an industrial-sized bag of lozenges and a week of rest. I can't make any comments about his 9:30 p.m. performance on the TD stage at the Place des Festivals, but by the time Hunter came back at 11 for a second free set, he was sounding like he had gargled with battery acid. In the end, though, his songs are always strong enough to carry the day.

BERNARD PERUSSE

During the Ninja Tune 20th anniversary show at Metropolis, Kid Koala took a five minute break and returned with the Slew, his '70s-rock celebrating four-piece with pal DJ P-Love and the rhythm section (bass and drums) from Australian hard rock act Wolfmother. Cutting up Led Zep and Ozzy samples, mammoth guitar riffs, harmonicas, spoken word samples and other silly stuff, the DJs offered a six-turntable master class on making the technically intricate seem effortless. Together with their musicians, they formed a classic rock band for the future. Who needs a singer, anyway?

T'CHA DUNLEVY

On the festival site, tots and toddlers spread their wings in dance for all the world to see! They "get" jazz, instinctively and naturally, clapping their hands in strollers, waving their arms in perfectly fluid syncopation. No need to analyze, or get hung-up on what jazz is and isn't.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

If you want to get a taste of how the out-of-town media is covering the jazz fest, you can do no better than tune into Michael Bourne's radio show on WBGO-FM (available on the Net at www.wbgo.org). It's the 18th appearance at the fest for Bourne, and from Monday to Wednesday he'll be broadcasting from 2 to 6:30 p.m. at the Musée d'art contemporain. He says he quit going to the other global festivals "because I can get everything I want in Montreal."

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Before he gets lost in the shuffle, kudos to Jean-Christophe Bèney, a French tenor saxophonist now living in Montreal who delivered a muscular, finely honed performance before a large crowd outside Complexe Desjardins on opening night. Who says straight ahead, sophisticated bop is a thing of the past?

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

ALL THINGS JAZZ FEST

Wondering what to see? Veteran Gazette jazz fest observers Bernard Perusse and T'Cha Dunlevy have a couple of suggestions. Have a listen to their audio podcasts and check out the daily disc reviews and other features on our Festival Central guide: **Montreal gazette.com/jazzfest**

TODAY'S FREE SHOWS

11 a.m. La Petite école du Jazz – Grande-Place du complexe Desjardins
Noon. Big Band Ozias – Rio Tinto Alcan stage
Noon. Red Baraat – CBC/ Radio-Canada stage
1 p.m. Gadji-Gadjo – CBC/ Radio-Canada stage
1 p.m. Montréal Dixie – PdA steps
1:30 p.m. La Petite école du Jazz – Grande-Place du complexe Desjardins
2 p.m. Red Baraat – Place des Festivals walkway
3 p.m. Big Band Lionel-Groulx – Rio Tinto Alcan stage
4 p.m. Montréal Dixie – Pub Heineken
4 p.m. Gadji-Gadjo – Place des Festivals walkway
4 p.m. Bourbon Street – Festival stage
5 p.m. Rotor Jambreks – Pub Heineken: See Our Picks
6 p.m. Carl Naud Quintet – TD stage: jazz fusion
7 p.m. Rotor Jambreks – Pub Heineken
7 p.m. Naad Brahma – Festival stage: trad Indian music meets modern jazz
7 p.m. Jo Hell & the Red Rooster – Loto-Québec stage: Montreal blues by way of Austin
8 p.m. Makaya – CBC/ Radio-Canada stage: competing for TD Grand Jazz Award and Galaxie Rising Star Award
8 p.m. Amanda Mabro with special guest Elsiane – Rio Tinto Alcan stage: Franco-German cabaret from Montreal
8 p.m. Omar Souleyman – Bell stage: See Our Picks, Disc of the Day
9 p.m. Isaac Neto – Le Balmoral: Brazilian guitar virtuoso
9 p.m. Angel Forrest – Loto-Québec stage: Quebec's Janis belts it out
9 p.m. Naad Brahma – Festival stage: see 7 p.m.
9 p.m. Lulu Hughes et le Montreal All City Big Band – TD stage: belter returns with crowd-pleasing set and set-up
10 p.m. Makaya – CBC/ Radio-Canada stage: see 8 p.m.
10 p.m. Amanda Mabro avec invitée spéciale Elsiane – Rio Tinto Alcan stage: see 8 p.m.
10 p.m. The Narcicyst – Bell stage: Montreal Muslim rapper
11 p.m. Lulu Hughes et le Montreal All City Big Band – TD stage
11 p.m. Angel Forrest – Loto-Québec stage: see 9 p.m.
11 p.m. Isaac Neto – Le Balmoral: see 9 p.m.
11:30 p.m. Dan Thouin et ses musiciens – L'Astral
Midnight. Coyote Bill – Savoy du Métropolis
Midnight. Isaac Neto – Le Balmoral: see 9 p.m.

OUR PICKS

8 p.m. Omar Souleyman (Bell stage): Björk loves him, and so do enough people in the Arab world to have made Omar Souleyman a Syrian techno star with some 500 cassettes out there. The sound may fire your soul, or it may drive you mad. Would Björk lie to you?

5 p.m. and 7 p.m. Rotor Jambreks (Pub Heineken): As you crawl upstream through the swampy summer air and all that jazz in its many miscegenations, you may need a shot of this breezy Frenchy pop-rocky band and their obvious Strokes envy.

MARK LEPAGE

DISC OF THE DAY

Omar Souleyman

Highway to Hassake — Folk and Pop Sounds Of Syria Sublime Frequencies

Omar Souleyman's music is raw, visceral, and immediate. In performance, he paces the stage, bellowing his Arabic lyrics while Mahmoud Harbi, his right-hand poetry man, whispers the next verse in his ear. Ouds, distorted keyboards and bouzoukis frantically fill the space he leaves, while a percussionist beats a propulsive rhythm behind it all. Souleyman came to fame through hundreds of cassettes he released and sold at street vendors throughout Syria. Imagine wandering around Damascus at 2 a.m., finding revellers, drunk on music, dancing through the night. More than an artifact of ethnomusicology, this is a deeply moving musical form presented at its best – which also happens to be its crudest.

ADAM KINNER

REVIEWS

Nikki Yanofsky delivers some pop to old standards

BERNARD PERUSSE
THE GAZETTE

BRYANNA BRADLEY THE GAZETTE

Nikki Yanofsky at Théâtre Maisonneuve last night, where she entertained a greying crowd with some old favourites.

It's fascinating to have a ringside seat at the reality show of a child star growing up.

Nikki Yanofsky is rarely far way from the eyes of her Montreal fans, who have watched her change from jazz-tot prodigy to international star in the making. Her sold-out show at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts last night – marking her fifth consecutive year at the Montreal International Jazz Festival – was another discernible step in her evolution.

Among other things, Yanofsky's stage presence is growing more authoritative, to the point where the grown men in her highly efficient backup band don't look so incongruous. And her stage patter, though still charmingly awkward, is becoming more confident.

It's been suggested that Yanofsky, at the tender age of 16, stands at the crossroads. Will she stick with the jazz standards that won the hearts of a solidly greying demographic? Certainly, the 50-year-olds in attendance last night were at the younger end of the age spectrum, and the seniors went wild for Take the A Train and a highly diva-ized Somewhere Over the Rainbow.

Or will she continue to explore the type of hook-driven pop and soul material that surfaced on her debut album, Nikki, released in April? That disc's wonderful Grey Skies – which she co-wrote – was a clear highlight last night.

Or what about all-around entertainer? She did, after all, prove adept at getting an audience singalong going during a medley of the Beatle songs Two of Us and Hello Goodbye.

But are choices really necessary? There's really no reason she can't have it all.

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Sidran talks a fun, funky Bob Dylan

IRWIN BLOCK
THE GAZETTE

Asking the question, "who or what is Bob Dylan?" the bluesy pianist and wordsmith Ben Sidran last night set out to redefine the undefinable.

In a fun and funky jazz festival concert devoted to Dylan's greatest tunes, Sidran pulled no punches about the enigma – "he (Dylan) doesn't sing under his own name or in his natural voice."

"The man is gone, there is no Bobby Zimmerman any more, he can't go home, he's on an endless tour," Sidran observed about Dylan, who was born Robert Zimmerman.

But his legacy lives because his music "tells a greater truth."

"Bob Dylan's a work of art" and that's why Sidran recorded the album Dylan Different and reworked Dylan's hits at the Club Soda last night, with his son Leo, a drummer, as part of the quartet.

"The spirit is in the room," Sidran said, launching into a funky Serve Somebody, followed by Rainy Day Woman #12 and 35, with the famous line, "Everybody must get stoned."

Whatever Dylan meant by that, he can claim "plausible deniability," Sidran said, tongue in cheek.

The first part of Rainy Day Woman was built on the chord changes of Miles Davis's So What, the second on Blue Monk, and the package had a true jazz feel, with the words spoken in the talking-blues style of Mose Allison.

He played the brilliant Everything is Broken, and noted that with the way things are going today, its message is "sad but true, it's coming apart, like a runaway train, and no one's in charge, man."

On the great Subterranean Homesick Blues, Sidran, 66, remarked how the song "helped me through some tough times – the words meant so much, the imagery, the swing, and the afterthought."

The crowd, a group that came to listen, soaked it up and applauded generously.

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